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Developing Community Planning Skills: Applications of a Seven-Step Model

Peter Boothroyd
Associate Professor
School of Community and Regional Planning

Introduction

This paper describes a range of current and recent education projects in community development planning for which I have been responsible. The sponsors have been the University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning and Centre for Continuing Education, the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), Thammasat University in Bangkok, and government and community organizations to which I have consulted. The projects provide some lessons on what community leaders and planners seek and find useful in planning education.

The projects have included community workshops, university courses at various levels (one of which has been delivered by telephone to remote communities), and on-the-job training of community planning facilitators.

What the projects have in common is a model of systematic planning which has been evolving over six years, and a learning-by-doing pedagogical approach.

The model is based on planning concepts familiar to professional planners. Like other models it identifies the planning process as a generic sequence of steps conducive to logical thought in any problem area, but unlike many other models it pays particular attention to the dynamics of collective deliberation within communities.(1) The concern with community planning is reflected in the way the steps are arranged and in the low-tech but powerful techniques suggested for use at each step. These techniques, which are continuously being adopted from various disciplines, encourage participation, contemplation and, depending on the step, either creativity or analysis.(2)

What is perhaps unique about the model is that it promotes use of the generic sequence of steps not only in all development sectors, but also at all recursive stages of activity -- from planning-for-planning to planning-for-implementation.(3)

Because the model can be applied to any kind of planning, it is readily practised in courses or workshops through relatively simple but real-life planning

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
2206 East Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1W5
604/228-5254; Fax 604/228-6164

exercises. Relevant exercise tasks can be identified by students themselves. Students have variously chosen to use the model to plan a hunt, a job search, resolution of an office personnel problem, class picnics, etc.

Evolution of the model began in response to the need expressed by people planning at the community level to learn how to improve their planning practice. The need has been most strongly expressed by people planning rural, especially non-modernized, communities. A few of these people are professional planners with credentials, but most are either para-professionals (i.e., people, such as Indian band planners and Thai community workers, who have full-time planning responsibilities but no formal planning education), or community leaders and staff not usually considered as planners --politicians, administrators, social workers and others.

The professional planners have been those seeking ways to build effective planning processes in communities which are no longer willing to be left out of the planning.(4) The para-professionals have been those who feel, as most do, uncomfortable taking on community planning positions without professional training in planning. The leaders and senior staff have been those jaded with higher-level government bureaucrats planning for their communities, or through them, and with planning consultants ripping them off by producing "useless" reports: i.e., those who want to be better at doing their own planning and making use of professional planners.

What was needed was a model which demystifies planning and brings it under community control while increasing the community's effectiveness in defining and reaching goals. On-going experimentation in the development and refinement of such a model, and of methods for teaching it, have since 1983 been an objective of 20 UBC non-credit university short-courses involving in total about 600 Indian leaders, some 30 workshops in Native and non-Native communities throughout Canada, a major community planning project involving cooperation between UBC and Thammasat in Thailand, 2 credit courses at SIFC and several courses in UBC's graduate program. The substantive foci of these educational projects have included economic development, community government and organization, settlement planning and resource management.

The following sections of this paper describe: the need for a rational model in community planning education projects; the history of the educational projects for which the 7-step recursive model was developed; the nature of the model plus some of the techniques it incorporates; criticisms of the model and my responses; and, the lessons being learned from experience in using the model as the basis for teaching about community planning.

Need for a Rational Planning Model in Community Development Education

Everybody plans all the time. As individuals, people plan meals, trips, classes, papers, etc. They must do it reasonably successfully or they would starve, continually get lost, lose their teaching job, etc. Collectively, people successfully plan allocations of household chores, hunting expeditions, community feasts, etc. This is true of people in all communities, including rural and traditional communities.

If community members plan effectively now, why do they need to learn about planning? The answer lies in increasing change, complexity, and conflict.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
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(604) 228-5254

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First, many communities which used to plan at a leisurely pace because they were relatively stable in their way of life (whether traditional, rural or urban) are now undergoing rapid qualitative change as a result of new external pressures and opportunities (e.g., intrusion of welfare state programs from education to birth control, availability of satellite TV, impacts of industrial megaprojects, commodity market instabilities, resource depletion). As an extreme, consider the Inuit who planned their migrations and technologies over centuries in response to slow climatic change, but who within several decades have been settled, educated, entertained and housed at present-day whiteman's standards but without the whiteman's economic base. They, as other destabilized communities from Thai villages to Vancouver neighbourhoods, seek ways to understand and control the changes.

Secondly, many communities are not only changing from one way of life to another, but from a relatively straightforward way of life to one which is more complex. Primitive societies were perhaps culturally more complex than modern society (e.g., in terms of kinship structures, customs, and religion), but the complexity was manageable because traditions changed slowly, they were within the control of the society, and relationships among the variables were not complex. In communities today, there is rapid change not only within the variables but also among the variables and in the introduction of new variables, and much of this change is externally generated. Many B.C. Indian coastal communities, for example, retain their clan and house systems, customs such as feasting, and fishing and hunting activities. But they now also travel far afield for work in a great variety of fields, learn new things in school, develop new tastes from TV and travel, have to contend with myriad Canadian laws as well their own, must deal with housing contractors and faceless bureaucrats, and are affected in their fishing not only by the vicissitudes of salmon runs but also by Japanese tastes, Vietnamese-Canadian competitors, multinational forest company practices, and U.S.-set interest and currency rates.

Thirdly, increasing community change and complexity in turn breed new conflicts to add to traditional conflicts between villages, families and classes. Communities find themselves debating the desirability of modernization, appropriate forms of democracy and leadership, trade-offs between large lots and service efficiency, community rights vs.individual rights over land, etc.

Thus, every community planning educational project in which I have been involved, whether with Canadian Indian bands, non-Native communities, or Thai villages, has been initiated in response to the need expressed by community leaders for help in managing change, complexity, and conflict; i.e., for help in becoming more self-governing in conditions of uncertainty. More specifically, the leaders have, in various ways, expressed the need to enhance their skills in:

- assessing modern opportunities and threats in the light of community values;
- translating aspirations into implementable projects through strategic priority setting;
- building institutions to manage community affairs efficiently and fairly;
- effectively using technical expertise and diverse information sources;
- co-ordinating complex planning inter-relationships among land use, infrastructure, economic, and social sectors; and,
- designing appropriate, participatory, creative yet rigorous planning processes for solving problems as they arise.

Enhancing such planning process skills cannot be accomplished efficiently, or even effectively, by teaching people detailed sector-specific substantive planning recipes. What people need are conceptual tools at the most general level which they can use to plan their own processes for dealing with a changing array of complex conflict-producing problems and crises.

To meet this need for conceptual tools, development of a planning model which non-professionals can use, or at least refer to, in their own multifarious planning, has been seen as necessary. The model has to be readily communicable, understandably logical, easily used, generically applicable, richly interpretable depending on

user skills and situation, and productive of implementable, fair and robust plans in conditions of complexity, conflict and change.

History of the Educational Projects and Evolution of the 7-Step Model

The model evolved as a response to community people who wanted to learn about planning but who had neither the time nor desire to work their way up to a graduate program in planning. The first of such people were Indian band planners.

Band planners began to be appointed in the early 1980's by their own bands. Bands used funding newly provided for this purpose by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in one of its earliest attempts at devolution of service delivery. Band planners were people with varying degrees of education and experience, but without any formal training in planning. The band planners, and the councils they worked for, saw a major need for some formal training in planning --at a minimum they wanted to have a clearer idea of what planning is. Several asked UBC to meet this need.

In 1983, UBC offered to "band planners" its first two-week "Introduction to Band Planning" course.(5) The course, which has been held every year since, teaches planning process and introduces a broad range of substantive planning topics such as social services, organizational development, settlement land use, economic development, resource management, land claims, and self-government. The 7 step model began as a means of teaching process concepts and as a thread on which to string the substantive topics.

Course participants have consistently evaluated planning process topics as most important. For instance, one class gave the following scores (compared to a maximum possible 39) for each of the topics that year:

process (the 7-step model)	33
comprehensive planning	23
organizing for planning	18
impact assessment	11
resource management	11
cost benefit analysis	9

Lower scores were assigned to the substantive areas of economic development, land use planning, social services planning and settlement planning, even though many of the instructors for these topics were personally popular.(6)

The first band planning students said that if they were to be effective as planning staff, the councillors and chiefs they worked for would also have to be introduced to the concept of planning. Accordingly, UBC began in 1984 to offer one-week planning courses to chiefs and councillors. Again process was emphasized and a range of substantive topics introduced.

The content distinction between the one-week and two-week courses soon became meaningless: band planners and politicians would register in either. In 1986, we introduced more specialized one-week courses. In 1989 these focus respectively on economic development, settlement planning and land use, and self-government. In each case, the 7-step model is part of the subject matter.(7)

In 1986, I was asked by the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College to prepare scripts for a full credit course in band planning to be delivered by telephone to bands in northern Saskatchewan. This provided the opportunity to flesh out the model and explicate its rationale, assumptions and applications.(8) A manual was distilled from the scripts and provided to students for their use when I taught the teletraining course in 1987.(9)

The manual, in various forms and editions, has become a useful tool at UBC and in the various short courses and workshops I conduct in the communities. It has been very useful in 1- to 5- day introductory planning courses presented by Inuit, Dene, west coast and prairie Native organizations.

With or without the aid of the manual, the 7-step model has been used to initiate land use planning in the Mackenzie Delta of the Northwest Territories, in the Kahnawake reserve of suburban Montreal, and in the international tribal lands of Akwesasne near Cornwall, Ontario. The model has been used to guide economic development planning in Yukon mining towns, in B.C. service centres, and in Indian communities across Canada. It has been used to guide organizational and

general development planning workshops organized by the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation and by various tribal councils in western Canada. (10) The biggest challenge was in using it to structure a curriculum-planning faculty meeting of our School.

As a result of the above experience with Native and other small communities, UBC was approached by Thammasat University in 1986 with the suggestion we jointly apply for a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency to undertake a four-year action-research project to develop planning skills and institutions in Thai villages. Two Thammasat economists/development-planners came to Canada to observe a short introductory planning course delivered in the field using the 7-step model. We received funding and began the project last year with a 3-month training session for our 9 field workers. For the first 2 months, with the Thai faculty interpreting, I used the model to introduce community planning concepts and techniques found useful in my work. The workers have used the model to help them plan their own work, to analyze indigenous planning, and occasionally to facilitate planning on small village projects.(11)

The pedagogical and practical utility of the 7-step model in non-credit courses and the community setting has led to its forming the core of a generic course in our graduate program called "Fundamentals of Planning Practice." (In this course, the model is contrasted with other models such as strategic choice, nominal group technique, and the ubiquitous goals → objectives → strategy sequence.) Students in our School with a wide range of substantive orientations as well as students from forestry, health services planning, landscape architecture and social work, have been attracted by the title, the outline of this course, and the relevance to planning in bureaucracies as well as in communities. It seems that prospective professional planners are as hungry to learn generic skills for guiding planning processes and groups as are community leaders and staff.

The Recursive Seven-Step Model

In the shortest possible form, the model consists of seven steps:
TASK, GOALS, FACTS, POSSIBILITIES, OPTIONS, ASSESSMENT, DECISION

In teaching the model, each of the "seven magic steps" (as our graduate students' ironically term them) can be addressed at various levels of complexity, depending on the background of the students and the time available. For the purposes of this short paper, the nature of each step can be elaborated as follows:

1. Define your planning **TASK**, i.e., what you are going to plan, how (the process), when, and by whom. The task must be clear (preferably written out on flip chart) and everybody involved in the planning process must agree that this is the task (though they may later revise it). After this agreement, none is necessary until the final decision-making step.

   Planning groups find it useful to consider whether their task is to plan the substantive solution to some problem (and if so whether at the policy or project level), or whether it is to plan a process for planning the substantive solution. Frequently they begin with a substantive task and, correctly, regress to a process task once they realize they have neither the mandate nor the information to solve the substantive problem.

2. Identify your **GOALS**, i.e., what the legitimate parties in the planning ultimately want for whatever is being planned. While other models urge unanimity at this step, this model accepts goal variety and conflict as virtually inevitable in community (as opposed to corporate) planning. In later steps tradeoffs will be resolved, ideally by finding win-win solutions.

   Distinguishing steps 1 and 2 was an important step in the evolution of the model: many other models are confusing in combining process goals (step 1) and substantive goals (step 2) under one heading.

   "Goals" and "objectives" are not distinguished in this model. Other models define objectives as sub-sets of goals (or vice-versa) and simplistically suggest proceeding from goals to *positing* objectives without recognizing that a full 7-step planning process is needed to select optimal means ("objectives") en route to goals.

3. Appraise the relevant **FACTS**, e.g., in terms of present and predicted future internal Strengths and Weaknesses and external Opportunities and Threats (to borrow the SWOT categories).

   Many other models (often implicitly) have factual analysis as step 1 rather than step 3. The predictable result is that data are collected and analyzed without any criterion of relevance and therefore without any use being made of the data. The waste of resources on unfocused community profiles and information banks is scandalous.

4. Generate many action **POSSIBILITIES**, i.e., things you *could* do to reach the diverse goals given the facts. Brainstorming works very effectively at this step, as do many brainwriting techniques as well as refinements of the basic brainstorming approach.

   Teaching this step not only teaches ways to synergistically generate ideas. It also teaches people to move from a debate-orientation, where the first idea on the table becomes the focus of ego-serving criticism or support, to a more reflective, objective planning orientation in which one may *offer* ideas without feeling called on to defend or challenge them.

5. Package the possibilities in terms of compatible and mutually exclusive **OPTIONS**. Decision-tree diagrams are often helpful here.

   The point of step 5 is to reduce the chaos of step 4 into a manageable set of choices which have to be made (i.e., options). In a simpler version of the model, where the ideas generated at step 4 are few in number or on the same continuum (e.g., ideas for fund-raising), Step 5 can be omitted: in the simpler version, the possibilities in raw form become the options.

6. **ASSESS** the pros and cons of each option. Many techniques are available, or can be developed ad hoc, for participatively taking this step with rigour. The simplest technique is listing pros and cons of each option. Others are goals achievement and cross-impact matrices, and in special circumstances cost-benefit analysis.

   Techniques for taking this step form a core part of the curriculum in professional planning schools. The trick is to contextuate the techniques within a logical planning process and to adapt them to community participation.

7. **DECIDE** on an option to adopt (or to recommend) using culturally appropriate procedures (consensus, voting, leader decides, etc.).

At any step people can, and often do, revert to a previous step. The model encourages reflection at each step to determine whether the planning group needs to back up. The point of the sequence of steps is not to straitjacket discussion but to provide some clarity about the direction of the discussion and to help people relax in the knowledge the discussion is leading to a decision even though it seems open-ended within a step. ("We're brainstorming ideas now; later we'll be assessing them in order to select the best one." "We're talking about our visions [goals] now; later we'll be talking about how 'practical' they are.")

The decisions taken at step 7 lead either to physical action, and/or more likely further planning to implement the decisions. The follow-up planning follows the same 7 steps. The result is a recursion of broadly identical processes leading, for example from planning-for-planning-for-planning (N-2) to planning-for-planning (N-1) through substantive planning (N) to implementation planning (N+1) to physical action. In this sequence, the decision of one process sets the planning task for the next process.

The N-1, N, etc., symbol system works very effectively to guide discussion at the task definition stage. It is not unusual to hear people exposed to the model saying such things as "we've made a mistake here--this is an N-1 problem, not an N problem," or, "our mistake was back at the N-2 stage in not thinking carefully about the right people to plan the planning." Thus, the recursive nature of the model increases the planner's power on the one hand (because it conditions the planner to think about getting leverage on a problem by planning the planning [N-...] and about carrying on the planning [N+..] until action results), and it simplifies learning about planning on the other hand (because only 7 steps need to be understood for undertaking any

kind of planning, including the planning of processes themselves).

While the model sees the planning process as complete after a decision is made, the projects which teach the model also emphasize that planners must be responsible for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the decision.

To encourage implementation of complex decisions and to facilitate monitoring, students are encouraged to use a modified Gantt bar chart. The chart not only illustrates the break-down of tasks and their timing relationships, but most importantly for volunteer groups, the persons responsible.

Students are also taught to think of evaluation less as an accountability tool and more as a component of the planning-->action-->evaluation trinity. To teach this trinity is to teach an experimental action-research attitude to life, an attitude that "failure" does not consist of making mistakes: one has "failed" when one fails to try to avoid mistakes, or when one fails to make a decision and act, or when one fails to learn from mistakes. People responsible for planning the development of their communities respond to this concept because so much of their frustration lies in trying to create harmony among dreamers, doers and critics.

In fact, the strength of the 7-step model in all its components lies in its potential to synergize the dreamer, doer and critic in all of us, through a process which clarifies which persona is appropriate at which time.

Critique of the 7-Step Model

UBC graduate students have taken to calling the model the "seven magic steps" because they are bemused by my claim that following the steps will produce an optimal decision in any problem area requiring a group or community decision (or even an individual decision). They are bemused, I think, because in planning theory textbooks they are told that rational comprehensive planning is impossible, undesirable or passe, and that planning process cannot be separated from substance. For example, Chris Paris claims that "to view planning theory as a separate, internally coherent set of procedural logics, operating in 'given situations' is....[a]t best [to make it] a cookbook of instructions for doing planning-as-a-job but at worst it could be a deliberate attempt to focus on the uncontroversial and the mundane..."(12)

More specifically, five types of concerns have been raised about the recursive 7-step model from various quarters: (i) the model may be inappropriate to some cultures and to foist it on them is imperialistic; (ii) the model may be overly ambitious in its claim to general application in all substantive areas; (iii) the model may be trite, linear, mechanical and if taken seriously, intellectually confining; (iv) the model may be too complex because of the fine tuning involved in separating so many steps and because of the recursive concept and language; (v) the model can be exhausting to use at so many levels of recursion and is unnecessarily powerful for planning for planning.

I share all five concerns. Indeed, (i) the model is derived from a particular culture, (ii) my generic substantive claims for it are ambitious, (iii) it is linear insofar as the steps are sequential, (iv) in parts it can be difficult to learn, and, (v) it can be tiring to use.

On the other hand: (i) people from a wide variety of cultures have found it useful when confronted by the need for planning to deal with conflict, complexity and change; (ii) the model has worked, i.e., has helped people (including graduate students) come up with creative, realistic, consensual, implemented plans in a wide variety of substantive fields including economic development, organizational development, land use planning, resource management, curriculum development, structuring of volunteer committees, and planning for self-government; (iii) the model allows, and encourages, cycling back to rethink at previous steps and even previous (N-...) processes; (iv) the model can be used simply (e.g., by omitting the options step or by simplifying the assessment step to a discussion) then refined with richer understanding and practice according to the demands of the planning problem; (v) the model need not be followed slavishly -- an understanding of the principles it incorporates can be helpful in organic unstructured planning discussions; furthermore it becomes, like any other tool, increasingly easier to use with practice; and, its use even if

tiring can in the end prevent the wasted energy and frustration which results from poor planning.

The most recent empirical example which convinces me to carry on using, developing and teaching the model is provided by the report of a senior administrator for a B.C. Indian band, who was becoming quickly exhausted by her workload and the confusion in the multifarious band operations. After being introduced to the model in a two-day workshop, she happily found that she could personally use the model to set priorities, could use it with her staff to plan the full band's annual planning meeting, and could use it as the basis for the agenda of the planning meeting itself.

Conclusion: Lessons Being Learned From Using the 7-Step Model

From the responses of students in the various planning education projects which use the 7-step model we have learned the following about teaching planning process to people engaged in community development planning.

First, at the most general level, we have learned that community leaders, staff and advisors, are hungry for planning process concepts and techniques which will help them help their communities plan to manage change, complexity and conflict. Community leaders appreciate being introduced to, and practising, systematic thought about group dynamics, the logic of problem-solving, relations among planning and decision-making, the role of research, decision-making criteria and methods, and the function of evaluation.

Second we have found that a rational planning model, for all its defects, is useful at a minimum for its heuristic value, and at a maximum as an off-the-shelf tool for day-to-day use. More specifically, we have found that the recursive 7-step model can be readily communicated, understood, used, practised, and appreciated for its effectiveness.

Third, we have discovered which planning concepts seem to be most useful to people coping with change, complexity and conflict. Some of these are:

- planning is an ongoing activity, integral to ongoing community management;
- good planning does not just happen, it has to be planned;
- planning is planning, one does not need to learn different processes for different tasks;
- planning (N-1) to involve community members in planning results in plans that are acceptable and implemented;
- the planning process itself has impacts on a community --both the process and the product are important;
- goal-directed planning is more effective and efficient than planning which starts with a survey;
- creative planning can lead to win-win solutions in conflict situations;
- brainstorming (mutually generating ideas without criticism) produces more creative solutions than debate and rhetoric;
- practising brainstorming encourages people to be intellectually cooperative and mutually reflective;
- there are usually pros and cons to any idea, and both should be considered to avoid both macho optimism and cynical despair;
- planning may result in a decision to continue planning (N+1), but planning should not cease until there is action;
- actions should be monitored and evaluated, planners should take an experimental approach to their work;

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, community leaders and planners have appreciated receiving the overall message the 7-step model attempts to convey: people can successfully and enjoyably plan for themselves. They discover that planning is a fine art that takes practice, reflection and use of techniques, but that it is not an esoteric art. Like any other creative

work, planning is often frustrating and time-consuming, but ultimately richly satisfying.

References and Notes

1. cf. the Strategic Choice model as described in, e.g., A. Hickling, *Aids to Strategic Choice* (Vancouver: Centre for Continuing Education, University of British Columbia, 1975).

2. The key words in our library that yield the most literature on techniques useful for community planning are "Problem Solving" and "Group Process". The social science field of social psychology and the applied field of management respectively offer rich insights and practical techniques. As an example of the latter see A. B. Van Gundy, *Managing Group Creativity* (New York: American Management Associations, 1984).

3. The concept of "recursion" comes from mathematics. It has been used to effect by systems theorists such as Stafford Beer. The idea is that the elements/functions of a system are mirrored in its sub-systems and containing system.

Douglas Hofstadter's book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), is a long rambling discussion of the concept of recursion and its applications in art (Escher), music (Bach), and computers. Like others, Hofstadter credits Godel with the discovery of recursion as a powerful concept: "[Godel's] idea was to use mathematical reasoning in exploring mathematical reasoning itself. This notion of making mathematics "introspective" proved to be enormously powerful..." (p. 17).

In the case of the planning model discussed in this paper, the recursive idea is that planning processes need to be planned by planning processes; and moreover, that planning processes are homologous (i.e., involve the same steps) throughout the infinite regression of planning, planning for planning, planning for planning for planning, etc.

4. See for example, R. Pecarski, "Comprehensive Community Planing within B.C. Indian Communities," M.A. thesis. Vancouver: University of B.C., 1987.

5. For philosophy of the UBC courses see P. Boothroyd, "Enhancing Local Planning Skills for Native Self-Reliance: The U.B.C. Experience," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, VI, 1 (1986): 13-42.

6. As reported in Boothroyd, op. cit.

7. Course brochures are available for most years.

8. P. Boothroyd, "Scripts for Thirteen 4-hour Sessions of a Teletraining Course in Band-Planning." Regina: Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, 1986.

9. P. Boothroyd, *Handbook on Community Planning Process*. (mimeo). Regina: Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, 1986.

10. Course and workshop reports provide details on how the model has been used in courses delivered in the field.

11. P. Boothroyd, "Learning from a Project to Strengthen Planning Capabilities in Rural Thailand," presented to spring meeting of the Association of Canadian University Planning Programmes, Calgary, 1989.

12. C. Paris (ed.) *Critical Readings in Planning Theory* (Oxford: Pergamon Press: 1982) p.7.